Suicide Postvention

Suggested Procedures During the Aftermath of a Student Suicide

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Outline

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Introduction

- In 2005, suicide was the third leading cause of death among youth aged 15-24.
- Females have a higher rate of suicide attempts, yet males are five times as likely to die by suicide.
- Other factors associated with higher rates of suicide include age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and access to firearms.
- It is estimated that six people are directly affected by a completed suicide. These individuals are considered “Survivors of Suicide.”

Introduction

- Survivors typically experience an array of emotional reactions:
  - Shock, guilt, despair, denial, anger, disbelief, pain, shame, hopelessness, rejection, confusion, and self-blame.
- Suicide is associated with stigma, guilt, denial, and limited social support.
- Survivors are at an increased risk of suicide contagion.

American Association of Suicidology (2007); Parrish & Tunkle (2005); Debski, Spadafore, Jacon, Poole, & Hixson (2007); Sakinofsky (2007).
Definition of Terms

- **Suicide Postvention**
  - Procedures aimed at identifying those affected by a suicide in order to decrease negative reactions and increase adaptive copying.

- **Survivors of Suicide**
  - Individuals directly affected by a completed suicide. Affected individuals include: family members, classmates, friends, teachers, girl/boyfriend.

American Association of Suicidology (2005); Brock et. al (2005); Parrish et. al (2005).
Special Considerations

Special factors that need to be considered when implementing postvention services.

- **Suicide Contagion**
  - Increase of suicidal behaviors shortly after a completed suicide typically due to imitation.
  - To decrease contagion, sensationalism, glorification, and romanticization should be avoided.

Brock (2002)
Special Considerations

• Assessing the Need For and Providing Support
  o Physical, emotional, and temporal proximity to the suicide act.
  o Specific attention should be given to the siblings of the suicide victim.

Parrish et. al (2005); Sakinofsky (2007)
Special Considerations

- Social Stigma
  - Survivors may be shunned or avoided by friends and/or family members because of an inability to comfort survivors or in fear of contagion.
  - Survivors may be reluctant to seek out help from mental health professionals, complicating the bereavement process.

Parrish et. al (2005); Brock (2002)
Special Considerations

- Providing Information
  - Information should be provided to facilitate understanding and clarification.
    - Follow the students schedule
    - Present information simultaneously as soon as possible.
  - Sensalization, glorification, and romanticization of the suicide act should be avoided to alleviate contagion.

Brock et al. (2006); Brock (2002); Debski et. al (2005)
Suicide Postvention Protocol

- **Goals**
  - Assist survivors with the grief process
  - Identification and referral of students at-risk for psychopathology
  - Reducing contagion
  - Providing appropriate information
- **Are postvention services always needed?**

Brock (2003); Brock (2002)
Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Verify the death has occurred
- Mobilize the crisis intervention team
- Assess the suicide’s impact and level of services needed
- Notify other school personnel
- Contact the family of the suicide victim
- Determine what and how to share information
- Intervention services
- Memorials and funerals
- Dealing with the media
- Debriefing
Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Verify that a death has occurred
  - Police or sheriff departments, hospitals, family of suicide victim, coroner’s office
  - Label the death a suicide once it’s been officially determined.
    - Medical examiner or coroner’s office.
- Mobilize the crisis team
  - School Psychologists are the Crisis Intervention Coordinator
    - Identify individuals in need of postvention services
    - Facilitate community based mental health support
Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Assess the suicides impact and level of services needed
  - Physical Proximity
  - Emotional Proximity
  - Temporal Proximity
- Other factors that contribute to the level of services needed:
  - When, by whom, and where the death took place
Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Notify other involved school personnel
  - District office
  - Other potentially affected school sites
  - Staff members at the school affected by the death

- Contact the family of suicide victim
  - Should be made in person, within 24 hours
  - Offer empathy, postvention services, and identify others affected by death
Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Determine what and how to share information
  - Before death is classified a suicide
  - After death is classified a suicide

Goal: To provide factual information without glorifying or vilifying suicide victim. Rumors need to be dispelled as soon as possible.

- Talking to students
  - Factual information delivered simultaneously in classrooms or small groups

- Talking to parents
  - By letter
  - Parent meeting
Suicide Postvention Protocol

- Intervention services
  - Initiated within 24 hours
  - School Based: Walk-thoughts, drop-in counseling, individual/group counseling, classroom activities/presentations, parent/staff meetings.
  - Community Based: Outside mental health referrals for students needing psychotherapeutic support.

High-risk students and level of support will be contingent on the impact of the suicide on the school site.
Suicide Postvention Protocol

• Memorials and funerals
  o Do…
    ▪ Encourage affected students to attend the funeral service
    ▪ Develop suicide prevention procedures, including better ways to cope with emotion.
  o Don’t…
    ▪ Send all students to funeral
    ▪ Cancel of change the school schedule
    ▪ Permit physical memorials on school grounds
    ▪ Fly flag at half-staff, have assemblies or yearbook dedications for victim, or moments of silence.
Suicide Postvention Protocol

- **Dealing with the media**
  - Do…
    - Work with press to downplay the suicide act
    - Story on inside of paper
    - Provide information about community resources
  - Don’t…
    - Include a picture or “suicide” in caption
    - Provide details about the suicide
    - Romanticize the death

- **Debriefing**
  - Process emotional reactions
  - Evaluate performance
  - Plan for future postvention services
Conclusion

- In suicide postvention, “one size does not fit all.”
- Suicide Prevention is key.
- “Postvention is prevention for the next Generation!”

Questions
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